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Revitalization of the work of the General Assembly

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Note by the President of the General Assembly

1. In September 2000, at the Millennium Summit of the General Assembly, world leaders reaffirmed the indispensable role of the United Nations in the new century and decided to reform it in order to enable it to respond effectively and flexibly to topical international events. The General Assembly, with its central role, has to address that issue. The relevance of the United Nations will be judged according to that approach, according to the fulfilment of the spirit of the United Nations Millennium Declaration. Therefore, the General Assembly must be strengthened, be more effective and action-oriented.

2. On 13 March 2003, as a result of the open-ended informal consultations of the plenary on the revitalization of the General Assembly conducted during my Presidency, the General Assembly adopted resolution 57/301, an important resolution by which it amended rule 1 of the rules of procedure of the General Assembly to read: "The General Assembly shall meet every year in regular session commencing on the Tuesday of the third week in September, counting from the first week that contains at least one working day". By the same resolution, the General Assembly decided that the general debate in the General Assembly would open on the Tuesday following the opening of the regular session of the General Assembly and would be held without interruption over a period of nine working days.

3. The provisions of resolution 57/301 will be implemented as from the fifty-eighth regular session of the General Assembly; accordingly, the fifty-eighth regular session will open on Tuesday, 16 September 2003, while the general debate will open on Tuesday, 23 September 2003, and end on Friday, 3 October 2003. The resolution also regularizes the dates of the opening of regular sessions and of the general debate for future sessions.

4. In accordance with rule 31 of the rules of procedure as amended by General Assembly resolution 56/509, the General Assembly elected the President of the General Assembly for the fifty-eighth session on 6 June 2003 and on the same day also elected 21 Vice-Presidents and Chairpersons of the main committees. That early election enables the smooth transition between successive Presidencies and thus

encourages the President and other officers to play their role in a much more efficient manner.

5. Also during the fifty-seventh session, in accordance with resolution 57/8, as an innovative step, an open-ended panel of the General Assembly was convened for the first time. The open-ended panel focused on the theme "Afghanistan: one year later", which facilitated an in-depth discussion on the subject when it was considered subsequently in the plenary. A second open-ended panel was successfully organized on 4 September 2003, and focused on the theme "the role of civil society in the prevention of armed conflict".

6. Also for the first time, a draft programme of work of the plenary of the General Assembly for the entire main part of an upcoming session, that is, the fifty-seventh session, was provided to the Member States several weeks before the beginning of the session. In that programme, several items of the agenda were clustered, allowing for joint debates on interlinked issues, which resulted in cost savings. There was wide agreement on the desirability of additional clustering of items as well as the need to further consolidate the Secretary-General's reports on similar topics. As a result of the positive response to that initiative, a draft programme of work for the fifty-eighth session has already been circulated which proposes, based on the experience of the fifty-seventh session, additional clustering of agenda items and more joint debates.

7. The annex to the present note summarizes the principal elements discussed at the open-ended informal consultations of the plenary devoted to agenda item 53, "Revitalization of the work of the General Assembly", during the period from November 2002 to June 2003. It also contains some elements taken from the note of my predecessor (A/56/1005). It deals with a broad range of issues, including some of those that had been considered in the course of the plenary deliberations under agenda item 52, "Strengthening of the United Nations system", and agenda item 92, "Integrated and coordinated implementation of and follow-up to the outcomes of the major United Nations conferences and summits in the economic and social fields".

8. For further informal consultations on this subject, the report of a seminar on reform of the General Assembly, organized by the Permanent Mission of the Netherlands and the International Peace Academy on 16 and 17 May 2003, in Manhasset, New York, entitled "From promise to practice: revitalizing the General Assembly for the new millennium" (see A/57/836), was introduced and recommended for further discussion.

9. While taking into account the progress on the revitalization that has been achieved so far, some permanent representatives suggested that a slightly more proactive approach should be applied. In that regard, the idea of setting a concrete deadline (timetable/action plan/time frame) for deliberations on the revitalization was recommended.

10. I hope that this evolving document, which is an integral part of the continuous revitalization process, will be enriched by new ideas and proposals in parallel with the implementation of the agreed reform measures.

Annex

Revitalization of the work of the General Assembly

I. Context

1. During numerous deliberations, Member States expressed their support for the ongoing reform of the United Nations, including revitalization of the work of the General Assembly. More specifically, they called for further streamlining of the agenda, updating of the work programme and continuous biennialization and clustering of items. One proposal was to establish a "blue ribbon group" or panel of eminent persons (persons familiar with the United Nations agenda or active/energetic ex-diplomats), which might elaborate further suggestions on how to revitalize the work of the General Assembly.

2. Member States also stressed the issue of reporting with a view to having reports written more transparently and in a more focused and consolidated way, as well as issued on time.

3. The idea of restructuring the agenda and working methods of the main committees with a view to reducing the number of meetings during the main part of the General Assembly was particularly supported by small delegations. It was the general sentiment that the bureaux of the main committees could play an effective role in that regard.

4. The work of the plenary and the main committees should be better organized so as to permit the Assembly to concentrate entirely on its core tasks, which are:

(a) To discuss and take action in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations on international political, economic, social and legal questions and to consider the reports of the Secretary-General, the Security Council and the Economic and Social Council;

(b) To negotiate and approve international conventions;

(c) To discuss and adopt the budget.

5. Linkages between the agenda of the Committees must be further explored, as well as other ideas for rationalization of the agenda and related documentation.

II. Suggested reform measures

6. The suggestions set out below constitute part of a continuous process aimed at the revitalization of the General Assembly.

A. President and Vice-Presidents

7. The President of the General Assembly should meet more frequently with, in particular, the Chairpersons of the main committees, representatives of major groups and/or chairpersons of regional groups (on questions involving procedure) and representatives of the Secretariat so that meetings and the work of the main committees can be better planned. Meetings with the Chairpersons of the main

committees should also serve as an informal exchange on issues of common concern.

8. The President of the General Assembly should also continue to meet regularly with the Presidents of the Security Council and the Economic and Social Council and with the Secretary-General to discuss and/or share ideas on questions regarding the continuous reform and revitalization process.

9. The President should endeavour to be in New York on a more or less permanent basis during the session. The President of the current session should establish informal relations with the President-elect to ensure a smooth transition to the next session. To facilitate the handing over of responsibilities, the President, the Vice-Presidents and the Chairpersons of the main committees of the current session of the General Assembly should meet with the President, Vice-Presidents-elect and Chairpersons-elect of the main committees to discuss organizational matters before the opening of the next session.

10. The Secretariat should prepare the necessary documentation and all relevant information for the incoming President so that he/she will be fully prepared to assume his/her new functions. Adequate professional support should be provided to the Office of the President in the form of, for example, assignment of one or two United Nations professionals from existing staff directly to the Office of the President.

11. The President could give clearly identified responsibilities to Vice-Presidents.

12. Informally, the issue of size, composition and equal geographical representation of Vice-Presidents has been raised, in particular concerning the fact that the election of the President of the General Assembly has the effect of reducing by one the number of vice-presidencies allocated to the region from which the President is elected.

B. General Committee

13. The President should convene meetings and informal consultations of the General Committee in order to propose modifications to the agenda.

14. Member States represented on the General Committee should continue the practice of designating focal points to enhance the efficiency of the General Committee.

15. The outgoing General Committee members should be in close contact with the elected members of the incoming General Committee so as to work informally on the agenda of the next session.

16. The General Committee could serve as an advisory body to the President, particularly on procedural matters. During the fifty-seventh session, the President called a meeting of the General Committee on an extraordinary basis for procedural advice, and it proved effective.

17. The General Committee should, at the beginning of each session, consider the provisional agenda, with special emphasis on the identification of cross-cutting issues, and should make relevant recommendations to the General Assembly to further streamline the agenda.

C. Main committees

18. The Chairpersons of the main committees should bring to the President's attention proposals regarding the streamlining of their agendas and programmes of work (clustering of agenda items and joint debates, deletion of some obsolete agenda items, biennialization and/or triennialization).

19. The respective bureaux of the main committees should take measures to further enhance the effectiveness of their committees' work and continue to improve their working methods. Recommendations in this area must be consistent with the ongoing processes of the United Nations reform and revitalization of the overall work of the General Assembly.

20. The committees should endeavour to limit the proliferation of their reports and resolutions. They should work towards shortening some resolutions. Requested reports should be consolidated according to the items and not be a product of each adopted resolution (the Committees should decide at the end of the main part of each session which reports on related subjects will be consolidated; see para. 20 of General Assembly resolution 57/300).

21. Some committees have a short general debate at the start of their work, which takes the form of formal statements from a predetermined speaker's list. There is a strong sentiment that that general debate should be re-engineered. One option is to make it an interactive thematic dialogue, including keynote speakers, taking into account the work programme of the Committee.

22. In that regard, the organization of open-ended panels for discussion of some important agenda items is proposed; such panels should enhance the formal discussion and bring together experts from various fields.

23. Deadlines must be set for the work of the Committees, be announced well in advance and be strictly enforced. To facilitate the work of the Committees, the following dates should be clear: the date of submission of reports and the dates for submission of draft resolutions entailing budget implications. That could be a useful tool for enhancing the discipline of the committees and facilitating the work of the General Assembly as a whole.

24. The proposal to reallocate the items on the agenda of the Special Political and Decolonization Committee (Fourth Committee) to the plenary of the General Assembly and the main committees with a view to reducing the number of the main committees requires further careful review and study. The questions to be addressed, before any such radical reform is implemented, would be the appropriate reallocation of some items and the current interrelationship of the Fourth Committee with the Committee of 24. The ongoing proposal is to move the agenda items on decolonization issues, as well as the item on "Questions relating to information", to the plenary; to move the items on human rights and humanitarian issues to the Third Committee; and to combine the remaining agenda items from the Fourth Committee (including atomic radiation, peaceful uses of outer space and peacekeeping) with the agenda of the First Committee. Consequently, the suggested revised title for the First Committee would be "Committee on Arms Control and Political Issues".

25. There is strong support for the effort to improve the work of the Second and Third Committees (see, for example, General Assembly resolution 57/270 B), particularly to promote greater coherence and complementarity between them and to

eliminate potential overlaps and duplications, among others, by organizing regular meetings between the bureaux of the two committees and joint informal debates of the committees on cross-cutting issues.

D. Organization of the debates

26. In organizing the debates, the main goal must be to allow time for discussions on important issues and recent developments in international relations.

27. Efforts should be continued to reduce and group items by subject on the agenda and/or to take them up on a biennial or triennial basis.

28. On items where there has been no development from the previous session, efforts could be made to eliminate the most routine speeches (representatives could simply inform the General Assembly that their position is consistent with that of the previous session).

29. For debates on items of urgent concern to most members, speeches delivered during the session should take into consideration, as far as possible, responses and comments on proposals made by other speakers during their presentations.

30. To further promote interactive debates, when speakers (either representatives of major groups or representatives of Member States that have major interest in the issue) have delivered their statements, other Member States could comment on those statements, if they deem it appropriate, in order to make the debate more interactive. They could do so in the plenary from their seats.

31. In addition, whenever the President of the General Assembly considers it to be appropriate, following consultations with Member States, he/she could organize informal meetings or open-ended informal panels to study thoroughly matters of topical interest.

E. Guidelines on the conduct of work (see appendix)

32. The President of the General Assembly and the Chairpersons of the main committees are encouraged to use the rules of procedure in a comprehensive manner to promote the effective and constructive conduct of all aspects of the work of the General Assembly.

33. At the beginning of each session, the President of the General Assembly, as well as the Chairpersons of each of the main committees, should remind the members of these rules of procedure and encourage the members to cooperate fully in achieving the goals of the Committees.

F. Reports and role of the Secretariat

34. Reports should be concise, operational and analytical. With the exception of financial reports, the General Assembly should always set a limit to the number of pages requested for each report within the framework of the 16-page rule set, inter alia, by its resolution 53/208. Reports should conclude with recommendations for action to be taken by the General Assembly in order to facilitate the eventual

drafting of Assembly resolutions/declarations. The Assembly should avoid requesting too many reports from the Secretary-General. In some cases, the Assembly could request oral reports instead of written reports.

35. The President of the General Assembly should encourage the Secretariat to propose improvements that could facilitate the work of the General Assembly in accordance with rule 47 of the rules of procedure of the General Assembly.

G. Modern technologies

36. The General Assembly should be encouraged to make increased use of modern technology, especially for the counting of votes during elections or the drawing of lots.

37. Contributions from delegations on national experience in modernizing the counting of votes, particularly in parliaments, would be welcome.

38. In the meantime, Member States and the Secretariat should increase the number of assessors.

Appendix

"Rule 35

"In addition to exercising the powers conferred upon him elsewhere by these rules, the President shall declare the opening and closing of each plenary meeting of the session, direct the discussions in plenary meeting, ensure observance of these rules, accor l the right to speak, put questions and announce decisions. He shall rule on points of order and, subject to these rules, shall have complete control of the proceedings at any meeting and over the maintenance of order thereat. The President may, in the course of the discussion of an item, propose to the General Assembly the limitation of the time to be allowed to speakers, the limitation of the number of times each representative may speak, the closure of the list of speakers or the closure of the debate. He may also propose the suspension or the adjournment of the meeting or the adjournment of the debate on the item under discussion."

"Rule 68

"No representative may address the General Assembly without having previously obtained the permission of the President. The President shall call upon speakers in the order in which they signify their desire to speak. The President may call a speaker to order if his remarks are not relevant to the subject under discussion."

"Rule 72

"The General Assembly may limit the time to be allowed to each speaker and the number of times each representative may speak on any question. Before a decision is taken, two representatives may speak in favour of, and two against, a proposal to set such limits. When the debate is limited and a representative exceeds his allotted time, the President shall call him to order without delay."

"Rule 73

"During the course of a debate, the President may announce the list of speakers and, with the consent of the General Assembly, declare the list closed. He may, however, accord the right of reply to any member if a speech delivered after he has declared the list closed makes this desirable."

"Rule 109

"No representative may address the committee without having previously obtained the permission of the Chairman. The Chairman shall call upon speakers in the order in which they signify their desire to speak. The Chairman may call a speaker to order if his remarks are not relevant to the subject under discussion."

"Rule 113

"During the discussion of any matter, a representative may rise to a point of order, and the point of order shall be immediately decided by the Chairman in accordance with the rules of procedure. A representative may appeal against the ruling of the Chairman. The appeal shall be immediately put to the vote, and the Chairman's ruling shall stand unless overruled by a majority of the

members present and voting. A representative rising to a point of order may not speak on the substance of the matter under discussion."

"Rule 114

"The committee may limit the time to be allowed to each speaker and the number of times each representative may speak on any question. Before a decision is taken, two representatives may speak in favour of, and two against, a proposal to set such limits. When the debate is limited and a representative exceeds his allotted time, the Chairman shall call him to order without delay."

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After recalling the rules of procedure above, the President of the General Assembly and each of the Chairpersons of the main committees should also remind delegations, at the beginning of each session, of the following guidelines to facilitate courteous and respectful debate:

- The need for a stricter adherence to punctuality and for limiting the duration of speeches in all General Assembly meetings, including informal meetings.
- The intention of the Chairperson of a main committee to invite a permanent representative, in the event of protracted delay in action on proposals by a member of the delegation concerned, to personally present his/her point of view.
- The Fifth and the Sixth Committees have established their own procedures for reaching decisions. Adoption of resolutions by consensus should be encouraged by the Chairpersons of the four other main committees. However, consensus does not mean unanimity. In the event of disagreement, a decision needs to be sought by means of a vote in accordance with the rules of procedure.